



# Forest FEATURES



WALLOWA-WHITMAN NATIONAL FOREST

JUNE 2011

## PRESCRIBED BURN AT DEER CREEK

In May 2011 I had the unique opportunity to participate in a prescribed burn on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. The burn was conducted by crews and engines from across the WWNF and the Umatilla National Forest. The fire engines and team leads met up at 10am at the Deer Creek burn unit just east of the City of Sumpter to discuss the plan of attack.

The prescribed fire was ignited at the top of the unit and dragged side hill with drip torches in long strips following the contours of the land. Slowly the fire crept uphill, consuming the understory without nearing the canopy. As the clouds parted the intensity of the fire would increase and then lessen as the sun was covered again. Overall, 250 acres of forest were treated with a low intensity burn.

This was a special burn. The Ponderosa Pine unit being treated was at the maintenance point in a long term effort to restore the forest to its original fire adapted ecosystem. Fire managers across the WWNF are working on 5 to 10 year plans that will restore tens of thousands of acres of forest to their historical fire regimes and condition classes. Benefits include increased fire protection for homeowners in wildland urban interface areas, habitat for wildlife and healthier timber stands.

Several steps are required to bring forests back to this historic condition. First is an evaluation of the forest health. Then selective thinning is done to restore suitable density and canopy coverage. Next, the understory is treated by collecting part of the dead and down material and spot burning piles. The last step in the process is the introduction of a low intensity fire. After fire has been reintroduced into a Ponderosa Pine ecosystem, a burning schedule of approximately ten years will remove enough saplings, forest litter and brush to maintain a healthy forest understory and canopy.

Well, like all good days this one had to come to an end too. As I rode back to the station in the backseat of the pickup I listened to the fire managers discuss the days' events. I also took a moment to reflect about the possibilities of this forest management process and what it could mean for the long term health of other forest communities outside my area. Then I just laid back, enjoyed the smell of the smoke on my nomex shirt and realized how sore I was going to be the next day.



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THE SECOND STAGE OF THE FIVE PART PROCESS.  
AFTER THINNING, PRIOR TO TREATING UNDERSTORY.



AFTER THE INTRODUCTION OF A LOW INTENSITY BURN;  
THE FINAL STAGE OF THE RESTORATION PROCESS.